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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000623

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SUBJECT: MINISTER SAYS NO WITCH HUNT AGAINST FORMER
GOVERNMENT AND ANTI-CORRUPTION OFFICIALS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Local Government and Rural Development Minister Syed Ashraf Islam assured Ambassador Moriarty the Prime Minister did not support calls to prosecute the former army chief and former Caretaker Government officials. Ashraf also said trials of people suspected of war crimes in the 1971 war of liberation from Pakistan would be "symbolic" and would not become a witch hunt. In a wide-ranging discussion, the minister again proved himself to be a voice of reason and restraint within the Awami League government. Although not fully recovered from gall bladder surgery in March, he appears to be resuming an increasing work load both as minister and as the ruling party's principal spokesman.

NO WITCH HUNTS

¶2. (C) Local Government and Rural Development Minister Syed Ashraf (Ashraf) Islam on June 18 told the Ambassador that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina rejected calls to prosecute the former Chief of Army Staff General (retired) Moeen Uddin Ahmed and members of the unelected Caretaker Government that ruled Bangladesh under a state of emergency from 2007-2008. (Note: Both Hasina and her main political rival, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairwoman Khaleda Zia, were imprisoned on graft charges by the military-backed Caretaker Government. Several other prominent politicians from Hasina's Awami League and the BNP also were imprisoned. End Note.) Ashraf said all but a handful of Awami League politicians supported Hasina's position to not seek revenge. The Local Government Minister also disparaged the chairman of a Parliamentary committee who is seeking to compel former members of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to testify about their activities during the Caretaker Government. (Note: The committee chairman, Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, was convicted in a case brought by the ACC. End note.)

¶3. (C) Ashraf said trials of suspected war criminals in the 1971 fight for independence against Pakistan would be "symbolic" and involve only a handful of people. He predicted the process of gathering evidence and taking the cases to trial would be a "long process" that likely would take more than five years. Those convicted would likely receive lenient sentences. While Ashraf acknowledged the trials could strain national unity, he said they were necessary to bring closure to a topic that continued to bitterly divide the country. He acknowledged Pakistan strongly opposed the planned trials but said Bangladesh would pursue bilateral talks at the highest level in Islamabad to explain why the trials would go forward.

PURSUING HUMAN RIGHTS

14. (C) Ashraf confirmed that some Awami League colleagues did not want to stop extrajudicial killings by law enforcement agencies, which had been on the rise in recent weeks. He said he hoped a case recently filed by relatives of two college students shot dead by the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion would act as a brake on extrajudicial killings. The Minister also assured the Ambassador that Parliament would soon approve legislation creating a Human Rights Commission. He said the measure had no serious opposition.

KEEPING THE ECONOMY GOING

15. (C) The Ambassador noted criticism of the provision in the recently proposed national budget that would allow so-called "black money" hidden from the taxman to be legally invested. Under the plan, declared "black money" would be taxed at 10 percent, well beneath the regular 25 percent rate, and would have to be invested in approved sectors of the economy. Ashraf said the proposal was designed to widen the number of people paying taxes and would have a beneficial effect on national finances not just now but in years to come.

16. (C) Ashraf asked the Ambassador the likelihood of the Congress allowing Bangladeshi ready-made garments to enter the U.S. market duty free. The Ambassador said he was not optimistic because the U.S. economy remained in recession, which would make the removal of duties difficult politically.

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Ashraf noted garment manufacturers also were seeking relief on other fronts, including a drop in local bank interest rates of two percentage points. He also expressed interest in pursuing the development of other industrial sectors.

CYCLONIC STORM RELIEF

17. (C) Ashraf said southern portions of Bangladesh hit by Cyclonic Storm Aila on May 25 still were far from fully recovered. Drinking water remained in short supply, and sea water swept inland by strong tidal surges still had yet to recede. Ashraf said he hoped heavy rain would soon wash the salt water back into the sea. He also noted that embankments torn apart by Aila could not be repaired until after the monsoon season ended later this year.

COMMENT: A CALMING VOICE

18. (C) Of all the senior Government of Bangladesh leaders, perhaps no one talks as sensibly about policies and politics as Ashraf. He gives well-reasoned explanations for GOB positions on controversial issues such as war crimes trials and the "whitening" of "black" money. His reasoned approach to politics is precisely what is needed in Bangladesh, where hyperpartisanship often has hampered and even set back development. Post will continue to regularly meet with Ashraf for what has been a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas.

MORIARTY